

The Real Problem In 'Verifying' An Arms Treaty

By CARNES LORD

If our intelligence can't detect 2,000 or 3,000 Soviet troops in Cuba, how can we expect to verify the complicated provisions of a strategic arms limitation agreement? The inference may not be warranted (soldiers are not easy to keep track of by satellite), but the question has a point and may signal a new round in the public debate over the issue of SALT verification.

The point is not so much that the Central Intelligence Agency or the other arms of American intelligence are deficient in technical collection and analytic capabilities—though in the Cuban case there was clear inadequacy in both. The nonsecret findings of the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, made public late last week, assert that most aspects of a SALT treaty could be verified with high or "high-moderate" confidence, at least from a technical standpoint.

The real problem is that our intelligence, or the political leadership it serves, will not see what it doesn't want to see. Partly, no doubt, in order to protect its previous record on the subject, partly out of a desire to minimize the number of headaches it provides to the Executive Branch, the CIA (or elements of it—press reports spoke of fierce bureaucratic infighting) seems to have downplayed the Cuban evidence for some time.

The reaction of the administration itself has also been instructive. Bowing, apparently, to the uncertainty of his own information as well as to Soviet intransigence, the President chose to acquiesce in the Russian presence and implied that anything more would have meant a "return to the Cold War" and the end of SALT. Can anyone confidently say that the administration wouldn't react in just such a way to certain kinds of Soviet violations of SALT itself?

And yet if we can't trust our own intelligence chiefs and political leaders, who can we trust? Who, finally, will verify the verifiers?

The problem of bias in the evaluation of intelligence is really twofold. First, there is the bias built into the concepts, procedures and mental habits of intelligence organizations, in particular large bureaucratized ones like CIA. Secondly, there is political bias. This can come into play in a number of ways—politicians can intervene directly in the intelligence process (to suppress unfavorable intelligence), or indirectly manipulate it (to elicit favorable intelligence), or intelligence analysts can try to make themselves agreeable to political axes of their own without prompting from above.

Whether CIA has actually allowed its intelligence production to be tampered with, or has consciously shaped it, to suit the political requirements of Soviet-American détente is not yet clear, though allegations of this sort have been made. There are surely good bureaucratic reasons—its rivalry with the Defense Intelligence Agency and the military intelligence services—for CIA's consistently easygoing view of Soviet military developments in recent years.

The self-protective instinct of the bureaucrat is particularly fierce in the intelligence analyst, whose world is both small and unwarmed by normal civil service procedures. This appears to encourage the kind of blandness and conservatism in intelligence assessments so clearly reflected in some of the conspicuous intelligence failures (e.g. Iran) of the last few years.

Yet it can be argued that the real problem lies not with CIA but with its political masters. If CIA has been conceptually deficient in its approach to SALT verifiability, it seems to have performed creditably in monitoring compliance with SALT I. What complaints there were concerning verification of that agreement centered on the role of the White House in temporarily suppressing evidence of Soviet violations or downplaying their significance.

As the Senate Select Committee put it: "It is clear from the SALT I record that intelligence of possible Soviet violation of the treaty was . . . withheld from Executive Branch officials who had a need for such information." Whatever the merits of the criticisms that have been made of Henry Kissinger in this connection, there is in general a massive conflict of interest involved in entrusting verification of an arms control treaty to those who have a political and personal stake in its negotiation and its continued viability.

What, then, is to be done? Since we have only one President, politics can never be completely removed from the verification process. But there are organizational measures that would help considerably. First and most importantly, there should be an independent, high-level body of prominent persons that would report on verification matters to the President or the National Security Council.

A good model for such a body might be the now defunct President's Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board, which was responsible for initiating the so-called "B-Team" review of national intelligence that led to sharply revised estimates of Soviet military strength in recent years. The board, which had never been much liked by the insiders in the intelligence community, was disbanded early in the Carter administration.

Secondly, there could be more formal and systematic congressional involvement in the verification process. The Board could perhaps report concurrently to the chairmen of the Senate Foreign Relations and Intelligence committees, and a verification subcommittee might be created within the later committee to follow verification developments on a continuing basis.

But whatever the merits of this particular suggestion, it is surely time for the debate on SALT verification to move away from its narrow focus on technical issues and to consider political or organizational remedies to what is in very large measure a political problem.

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